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C O F F E E

Brazil is famous as the world's greatest producer of coffee, and ever since colonial times it has been one of the most important items of export, besides being extensively used locally. On the high lands in the interior of Pernambuco quite a bit of coffee is grown, though of course nothing to compare with the vast coffee plantations of the state of São Paulo.

The coffee tree, or bush as it is often called, is slow of growth, and seldom attains a height of over fifteen feet, I should say, though I never measured one. It has glossy, dark green leaves, and its branches, instead of growing out horizontally, have a strong tendency to grow upward, which gives it a certain superficial resemblance to a small pear tree. The seed are usually planted in a seedbed, and the little plants transplanted after about a year of growth. Often the custom is observed of digging a hole about eight inches in diameter and two feet deep, in which the little plant is set, thus giving it greater protection from the heat and glare of the sun, and at the same time getting its root system developed well below the surface of the ground. It used to be considered necessary to plant the trees in the shade, and this was done by clearing a new piece of ground, cutting all the trees except just enough to furnish the desired amount of shade, and leaving these permanently, or at least for several years, until the coffee trees should be well established. Many planters now, however, feel that this is not necessary. The tree begins bearing after from three to six years, depending on climatic and soil conditions, and may bear for as much as eighty years, I have been told. It needs cultivation, but usually little pruning, and will repay the time and expense of applying mulches and surface fertilizers.

In Pernambuco the weather is usually very dry from September to April, and during this time the coffee trees often become almost bare. But this long drought is nearly always interrupted by a series of thunderstorms, which may come at any time, but are expected and hoped for during January. These are often referred to as the "coffee rains". It is these rains that make the coffee trees bloom. And it is amazing how quickly the buds start out on the tree, which before the rain seemed almost dead. Almost over night the white, jasmine-like blossoms cover the trees, and fill the air with their

mild fragrance. New leaf buds come out at the same time, and the tree takes on new life. If these rains are followed by prolonged dry weather much or all of the fruit set may fall off; but most years there are occasional rains that serve to hold the fruit until the beginning of the rainy season. In years of very irregular rainfall a coffee tree may bloom two or three times, each time only partially, because of insufficient rain. Some of the fruit may be secured at each flowering, and sometimes a fairly good crop is made after all this irregularity; but it makes picking more difficult, as the fruit does not all ripen at the same time.

Normally, the fruit ripens about September or October, which coincides with the end of the rainy season, but I have seen it ripen as early as July. The fruit is somewhat similar to a cherry in size and general appearance, but there the similarity ends, for the coffee berry is almost all seed, two seeds occurring in each berry with their flat sides together, and covered with a thin layer of pulp. The pulp is sweetish, and has a flavor somewhat reminiscent of coffee. Children often eat this pulp, though older people believe that it is not wholesome for them. I have read that in Central America an acceptable wine has been made experimentally from this pulp. Berries formed near the ends of the branches often contain only one seed instead of two, the seed in this case being almost round, with a deep groove. In grading, these are separated from the seeds of normal shape, being considered superior in quality, due in part to the fact that the strength that should have gone into two seeds has been concentrated in one, and partly to the fact that these round kernels roast more evenly. The flat kernels have a tendency to burn along the edges before the center is completely roasted.

Picking is done by hand, the vessels used being the ubiquitous square five-gallon tin cans in which kerosene and gasoline are shipped into Brazil. Such a can is called a lata, and payment for picking is so much a lata. After picking, one of two processes may be followed. The simpler of these, generally practiced on the smaller farms, is to spread out the coffee berries in the sun, in a layer three or four inches deep, and leave them there, stirring occasionally with a hoe, until the pulp is completely dried. This period brings grey hairs to many mothers, as it is almost impossible to keep small children from playing in the tempting pile of berries, and they invariably get

their clothes badly stained in the process. After becoming thoroughly dry the coffee is sacked and sold, but it must still be put through a mill that takes off the dried pulp, which, after removal, is known as palha de café (coffee straw), and is returned to the land as a mulch and fertilizer.

The process used on the large plantations is more elaborate, but gives better results, as the coffee allowed to dry in the pulp goes through a sort of fermentation which is considered prejudicial to the best flavor. In the second, which is called the washing process, the coffee berries are first dumped in a large concrete vat, into which water is allowed to flow until it is full, and overflows into an open conduit. Here the thoroughly ripe berries are separated from those not fully ripe, as the latter sink, while the ripe berries float, and are carried by the water into the conduit, and along this to the mill that removes the pulp by whirling them in a large cylinder under a stream of water. The green berries are separated, not only for grading purposes, but because the process is different for them, as the pulp is more difficult to remove. (It is not practical to try to separate them in picking.) After the pulp is removed the coffee is spread out in the sun to dry, but must not be exposed to the direct rays of the sun, but during the hours from ten to three is covered with canvas. A good many days are required for thorough drying, and after this the coffee passes through a machine which grades it according to the size of the grains, and must still go through another machine in which is removed the thin membrane that clings to the seed after removal of the pulp in water.

In a great many Brazilian homes the coffee is still bought green, and roasted at home. The roasting may be done in an oven, but is often, especially in the humbler homes, many of which do not possess an oven, roasted in an open pan over a charcoal fire. The Brazilians uniformly like a very dark roast, and most of the North Americans who go there are not pleased at first with Brazilian coffee; but usually their palates soon become accustomed to it, and thereafter they prefer the dark roast. I have come into the kitchen as the cook was taking a pan of coffee from the oven, smoking so that I was sure she must have forgotten it and let it burn up. But I would find that it was just as she had intended for it to be.

Next comes the grinding, which is done in a mortar, with a wooden pestle about the size of a baseball bat. It is quite a job to grind a kilo (2.2 pounds) of coffee, as it must be ground as fine as dust, according to Brazilian standards. This is the old fashioned way, and still prevails in most of the interior, but the machine age is invading even the Brazilian kitchen, and many people now buy coffee already prepared, called café de fabrica, (factory coffee) or café em pó (dust coffee, that is, ground coffee.) Many people, however, stick to the old fashioned way, distrusting the manufactured article, and suspecting that it may be adulterated, a fear, alas, only too well grounded in many cases. The coffee may be roasted with or without sugar, but in either case the grinding is the same. With sugar means that crude sugar is mixed with the coffee beans before roasting, and is, of course, burned up in the roasting process, so that it does not make the coffee sweet, but causes it to make a stronger, blacker brew, and thus to yield more cups for the same amount of coffee. The bitter taste of burned sugar is not greatly dissimilar to that of coffee, and some people actually prefer it roasted in this manner, just as some people like coffee mixed with chicory. Chicory seems to be unknown in Brazil, or at least in Pernambuco.

Coffee is brought to the table in a coffee-pot, which may be of enamelware, metal or china; but it is never made in the pot. Percolators and drip pots are unknown. In every Brazilian kitchen there is a coffee cloth, of soft cotton material, about the size of a kitchen towel. This is washed out carefully after each use, so that, although it soon becomes horribly stained, it is really (in a proper kitchen) fresh and sweet. This cloth is laid across the top of a pan, and the desired amount of the finely pulverized coffee placed on it. Boiling water, in the quantity desired, is then poured over it, and the cook folds over the edges of the cloth, and grasping the ends, twists, thus squeezing out the water that has not already gone through. It should not be twisted too tightly, as this forces the coffee dust through the cloth, causing an undesirable sediment in the coffee. It is all done in a moment, and takes advantage of the maximum temperature of the water; and it certainly makes good coffee. Instead of saying "make" coffee, Brazilians often say "coar café", "strain" coffee, which must seem to them a more natural expression for the process.

We generally think of Brazilians as being great coffee drinkers, but I doubt if they drink much more than North Americans. However, their customs in the time and manner of drinking it are somewhat different.

The first meal of the day is called cafe. (One is said to tomar, "take", not beber, "drink" coffee). In a good hotel or a well appointed home the guest will find on the breakfast table a pot of coffee and another of hot milk, which may be blended according to individual taste, most people mixing them about evenly, as the coffee is very strong. There is sugar, of course, for the Brazilian likes his coffee sweet; but of food there may be only bread, but often there is fruit, (bananas, papaya or pineapple) and not infrequently a slice of cheese. Of course I have sat down many a time, in interior hotels and early morning restaurants, to a slab of cold bread with rancid butter, and black coffee of the kind that a friend of mine used to call 3-F coffee — fraco, frio, e fedorento, (weak, cold and stinking). But among people of discrimination a breakfast of bread and coffee alone may be a delight. The bread is made in small, pointed loaves, of the French type, and these are sliced in half lengthwise, toasted lightly over a charcoal fire, then buttered, and reheated so as to come to the table piping hot, crisp and savory. With good coffee, Solomon in all his glory could ask for nothing better.

The Brazilians often drink coffee between meals. If you want to talk business with a man, the first step is to suggest coffee, and you go together to the "cafe", which is sure to be near if you are anywhere down town, where you stand at the counter or sit on stools at a little table, and are brought a small demitasse cup, for which you paid twenty centavos (about one cent), though in some places it had gone up to thirty centavos in 1948. Nobody ever takes a second cup; but a man may take coffee in this manner two or three times in the course of a morning. In banks and offices coffee is served at least once during a morning or afternoon, though not to the customers unless they are very special customers. And you often see a man with a thermos bottle and a tray of cups peddling coffee on the streets, about the docks, or wherever there may be people too busy to go to the "cafe" to get it. However, coffee is not drunk with meals, except breakfast; but after dinner coffee is almost invariably served.

The visitor to Brazil may not be surprised to see very small children given strong, black coffee; but he may find it difficult to understand the almost superstitious fear that the Brazilians almost uniformly have of taking anything after coffee. Coffee comes last; and if you offer a Brazilian anything to eat -- candy, for instance -- you need not be surprised if he says, "No, thanks, I've just taken coffee." And you need not insist, for the coffee has settled that question. But especially are they afraid of taking anything cold after coffee. The American thinks nothing of eating ice cream, or drinking a glass of ice-water, after finishing his cup of coffee; but to the popular mind of the Brazilians this is inviting disaster. One is never caught in the rain on purpose, but the Brazilian is scrupulously careful not to be so caught immediately after taking coffee; and to take a bath immediately after coffee is considered equivalent to signing one's own death warrant.